

" A SERMON FOR THE SENSITIVE "

There is no question but that sensitivity is a good thing. It is a sign of culture and a mark of refinement. It is an integral part of the ethical personality. It is also a distinguishing characteristic of the Jew. Our Rabbis of the Mishnah thought that one of the three qualities that determines whether people are truly disciples of our Father Abraham, is: bayshanim - shyness or bashfulness. And what is shyness, the ability to blush and experience embarrassment, if not an expression of sensitivity? The ethical philosophy of Judaism requires of man to imitate G-d; and G-d is sensitive <sup>to</sup> -/the cry of the poor, the anguish of the afflicted, the sigh of the suffering. Maimonides taught in his Guide for the Perplexed that sensitivity is a pre-requisite for prophecy. Before Moses was permitted to hear the Divine voice from the burning bush, he had to have sufficient ethical sensitivity to be able to rush to the assistance of the seven daughters of Jethro who were oppressed by the Shepherds.

Yet, like everything else, sensitivity can be overdone. In our tradition, the ideal character is formed by walking along the Shevil ha-Zahav, the golden mean. Hence, we must walk the path of moderation and keep away from the extreme of hypersensitivity as well as from the other extreme of insensitivity. Our Rabbis attribute the destruction of the Holy Temple to the famous incident of Kamtza and Bar Kamtza - a tragedy touched off by ~~too~~ <sup>too</sup> much sensitivity people.

Most of us decent, well meaning people, sin in the direction of hypersensitivity rather than insensitivity. If anything, we are too delicate rather than too tough.

Herein lies the explanation of a strange prayer which we recite on leaving the Sukkah at the end of this festival: yehi ratzon mi-le'fanekha...ke'shem she-kiyamtí ve'yashavti be'sukkah zu, ken ezkeh le'shanah ha-baah leishev be'sukkat oro sheil livyatan. "May it be thy will, my G-d and the G-d of my father,

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that even as I have observed and dwelt in this Sukkah, so may I be privileged this coming year to dwell in a Sukkah made by the skin or leather of Leviathan." What could our Rabbis have meant by this? - A Sukkah made of the skin of a sea monster, a whale of a Sukkah!

This is what the prayer means. Leviathan, in Jewish literature, is a symbol of all that is evil, it represents disobedience and rebelliousness against G-d. And evil, by the nature of things, is very rarely oversensitive. Evil has a tough <sup>out</sup>side, a hard and leathery skin. What our prayer means, then, is that we hope that we who wish to serve the cause of the good and the noble learn to temper our hypersensitivity by getting us the skin of Leviathan. Too often good people have baby skin, <sup>a</sup>thin membrane. They react to the least criticism violently, they cannot bear unpopularity and the lurking <sup>fear</sup> that they are not being loved by everybody. All too often, decent people will have their whole day upset because of a minor, <sup>remark</sup>unintended critical ~~words~~ uttered by a friend, a neighbor, a colleague, or business associate. They take the least ~~pin prick~~ as a crushing blow to their self-esteem, and their inner reaction is out of all proportions to the injury actually sustained. So we must pray: make us thick skinned, give us a tough and impenetrable hide like ~~that of~~ evil itself.

Indeed I never saw a professional thief who was sensitive to petty insult. He regards his task as too important to be diverted by such matters. I never heard of a murderer who smarts because he was not honored by his ~~peers~~ peers.

Perhaps in the world in which we live, the Leviathan of our day would be Mr. Khrushchev of Russia. And we can learn a great deal from him. When he could not get his way at the United Nations, this Leviathan banged his shoe on the desk at the General Assembly, completely insensitive to the reactions of his fellow delegates who were offended by his crude manner. When he thought that the security of Russia demanded a resumption of testing of Nuclear bombs, he acted with complete insensitivity to the opinion of the so called neutral or non-allied <sup>an</sup>nations.

And When the Secretary General of the U.N. was recently killed, he went along with condolences, but refused to participate in the eulogies - insensitive to even the most elementary form of courtesy. I do not say that we should ever adopt the goal of this international Leviathan; nor should we ever develop the extreme of insensitivity. But I do believe that the forces of good must get themselves at least a little bit of oro shel livyatan, the thick hide of evil.

And O how we need a Sukkah of the skin of Leviathan! Sometimes one of us may come to the point where we view our lives <sup>in</sup> ~~and~~ <sup>or</sup> ~~prospective~~ and discover a great emptiness, and decide that we want to begin truly thinking, to ~~which the~~ study ~~of~~ the classics of our people, our faith, and those of all humanity. We begin upon our new-found avocation with great enthusiasm - ~~and~~, ~~until~~, at the very beginning, we are frustrat<sup>ed</sup>~~ed~~, for some neighbor or friend has carelessly let the deadly word drop from his lips: "the intellectual snob!" The pin-prick has penetrated our baby skins, and frustrated our best intentions. O for the oro shel livyatan.

There comes a time when any decent person is revolted to the core of his soul by the disgusting sensuousness and immorality<sup>y</sup> of what goes nowadays by the name of entertainment. We are overwhelmed and scandalized by the celebration of sexual degeneracy<sup>that passes</sup> for art in our movies and in our theatres. We should like, sometimes when attending one of these demonstrations, to get up right in the middle of the performance and walk out demonstratively, in revolt against this dominion of filth. We want to do this badly - but then we fear the unkind snicker by a <sup>foolish</sup> ~~stupid~~ neighbor: "the prude!" And so we return and submit to this salacious onslaught against our soul, ourselves, our sons and daughters. O for the skin of Leviathan!

Perhaps there is here a woman who would like to increase her observance of the Sabbath. Perhaps there is a man ~~is~~ here who would like to add to the piety which he has practiced in the past. But how he or she may fear to do so, because in the next seat or in the next house or in the next street there is someone who will smile knowingly and say to his neighbor, "Yes, must be growing old - turning religious!" Or even worse, the cutting and stupid epithet, "he is becoming a fanatic!" yehi ratzon mi-le'fanekha - may it be thy will, O G-d, ~~there are~~ <sup>that</sup> those of us who oppose Leviathan learn to dwell in a Sukkah made of his skin, hard, <sup>and</sup> strong.

Indeed, the truly great Jews of the past did have the tough skin of Leviathan, not the hypersensitive membrane that some of us may have. They may indeed have felt hurt and grieved and injured with ~~him~~, but they did not allow this to frustrate them in their great goal. Moses was a highly sensitive individual. Yet, for the historic and holy cause which he espoused, he risked unpopularity. He was, perhaps, one of the <sup>e</sup> ~~last~~ popular leaders of all times. He was admired and respected, but hardly ever loved. Maimonides was sensitive, but not hypersensitive. He probably had more opponents and critics than any other Jew in our long history. Yet in the introduction to his Guide he told us that he preferred to satisfy the intellectual searching of one <sup>intelligent</sup> ~~impenitent~~ man even at the risk of displeasing 10,000 fools. The Baal Shem Tov was an unusually poetic personality. He was sensitive. But he was not hypersensitive - and therefore he founded the great Hasidic movement despite his very many and bitter mitnagdim, opponents. The State of Israel would not exist today if its leaders and population were hypersensitive. It has been popular with almost noone except our Jewish brethren - and not even with all of them.

So we Orthodox Jews of the United States and throughout the world must always be sensitive, but never too sensitive. When we believe that we are in the right, we must not be deflected from our goal by the sneer of the scoffer. We must always try to win the respect of the outside world, <sup>but</sup> ~~and~~ not try too hard



to win its love.

In one of the most amazing passages in all the Talmud, the Rabbis tell us ha-roeh she-yitzro mitgaber alav yalbish schechorim ve'yelekh le'makom she-ein makirim oto sham, ve'yaaseh mah she-libo chafetz. "He who sees his temptation getting the better of him, let him dress in black clothes and go to a place where no one recognizes him, and there he can do what his heart desires." What a remarkable statement! Did our Rabbis really mean to instruct us on how to sin in safety, to present us with a manual of crime without punishment? A beautiful answer and a most remarkable insight were provided for us by the great Kotzker Rebbe who observed that the Talmud speaks of the yetzer but not specifically of the yetzer ha-ra; "temptation" does not always mean the "evil temptations." Yetzer can mean, as well, the yetzer tov, the temptation to do good. What our Rabbis meant, he explained, is that often a man will find his temptation to do good overpowering him. He will feel an upsurge of goodness and kindness and holiness bursting the bonds of his soul. But he will be afraid to express it, hypersensitive to the scoffing remarks of his fellow men who will immediately distrust his sincerity and resent his attempt at becoming a truly superior individual. In such case, he interprets the remark of the Talmud, it is even worth changing your clothing, your residence, your whole way of life, and avoid the frustration that comes from hypersensitivity, as long as you will allow the decency within your heart to express itself fully.

What a wise interpretation. We all have the urge for goodness, but all too often it is stillborn because of our oversensitivity to someone's silly sarcasm. I would add to the interpretation of the Kotzker Rebbe the advice to be frank and forthright and come straight to the point - and then you will discover that your fears and discomfort and hypersensitivity were mostly an illusion.

I know some man who will never fail to ~~praise~~<sup>prayer</sup> the Minchah service every day of the year. But sometimes when, in his office, he is in the midst of a conference with a customer, he will apologetically announce that he must leave for a private meeting or an urgent personal matter and will return in 10 minutes. Wonderfully/- let him do what the goodness of his heart desires. But how much more wonderful if this same person will overcome his sensitivity and take the chance at becoming a "black sheep" - wearing shechorim - and saying directly to his customer, "please excuse me for a few moments, I must retire in order to say my prayers." I feel confident that this man will discover to his great and pleasant surprise that instead of becoming a "black sheep", in shechorim, he will win respect for his sparkling forthrightness.

Or take the case of a man who never will touch non-kosher food. Yet when he finds himself in religiously mixed company and is offered a forbidden dish, he will mumble something about being a "vegetarian" or on a special diet by doctors' orders. That is commendable; as long as he follows the laws of Kashruth, he is a good Jew. But I would advise that he take the risk of having his friends resent him as if they do not recognize him any longer, as if he is in a place that ein makirim oto. Let him say - without undue arrogance, pride, or a "chip on his shoulder" - "I keep kosher!" Let him wear the tough skin of Leviathan. And, likely as not, he will be happily amazed to learn that instead of friends acting as if ein makirim oto, as if they no longer want to know him, he will gain in esteem in their eyes, and win their respect for the new stature of his personality.

This, is the meaning of the interesting prayer we have been discussing. It tells us that sensitivity is extremely important, but that we Jews prefer to follow the Golden Mean to be moderate and not extreme. The forces of goodness must learn from evil the secrets of a tough hide in the service of good and holy causes.

On Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur we were inspired to aim for a noble goal. We learnt all over again the ambition for virtue and decency. Today, on Sukkot, we learn not only the goal, but the method; not only the aim, but the technique: that of courage, bravery, and determination. Yehi ratzon, may it be G-d's will that all of us have a happy and healthy year, that we are together again next Sukkot, and that, by then, we will all have learnt to get ourselves the skin of Leviathan.